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## Seeking the Shalom: Wholistic Adventist Urban Mission and Centers of Influence

The Psalmist captures a poignant moment as Jewish exiles sit beside Babylonian rivers, lamenting a lost Jerusalem. They are alienated emotionally, physically, and spiritually from that home. Their captors command them to sing, but they cry out, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:1-4, KJV). This is a fundamental missiological question. How *do* we sing God’s song in new and unfamiliar territories, among different cultural and religious groups, in large metropolises where we do not feel at home, where we have not yet found our voice?

In the book of Jeremiah God gives specific instruction to the exiles on how to “sing” in their new alien urban environment. He throws cold water on any hopes they might have for a quick return to their homeland. Instead, he tells them to settle down, build houses, plant gardens, marry, and seek the *shalom* of the city: “But seek the welfare [*shalom*] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for its welfare [*shalom*] and you will find your welfare [*shalom*]” (Jer 29:7, NIV).

*Shalom*, a rich, multi-layered Hebrew word, means, among other things, peace, prosperity, welfare. And God is telling them to pray and work for the *shalom* of the city. In doing so, he says, they will find their own *shalom*. This is startling counsel. They are not to set up a separate Jewish enclave in the city of Babylon, which would perhaps be their natural inclination. After all, it would be so much easier if they kept together as a cultural and religious family. It would be easier to keep the Sabbath, to eat kosher food, to avoid idolatrous Babylonian practices, and to comfort each other with shared memories and hopes. But God tells them to do the exact opposite—to engage in their society, to bring *shalom* to the city.

Some six centuries later, the long-awaited Messiah worked for the *shalom* of towns and villages where he ministered. He did teach in synagogues, but they were not the focus or center of his wholistic mission.

Rather, his healing hand and voice brought *shalom* to blind men beside dusty roads, women gathered by wells, and tax collectors in trees. Ellen White summarizes his *shalom* ministry as involving five components: mingling with people, showing sympathy to them, ministering to their needs, winning their confidence, and bidding them to follow Him (White 1942:143).

This wholistic ministry involves words and action. It cannot be done from a religious enclave, by remote control, from a distance. It cannot be short-term, with only passing contact. It involves rubbing shoulders, touching hands, looking into eyes with Jesus' compassion (Matt 9:36). It is not just about *telling* people about the truth of God's Word, but *demonstrating* the truth of that Word. So when we look at Adventist urban mission today, the starting point must be our stance, our perspective, our motivation—which can be nothing less than Christ-like love.

The question of motivation for service occupied the minds of Adventists gathered in Battle Creek on November 2, 1901. The *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* reported that on that Sabbath they celebrated Missionary Day and A. G. Daniells led out in a symposium on "the true basis for missionary work." The same issue of the *Advent Review* carried an article by Dr. David Paulson entitled "The True Motive of Christian Service."

Paulson spoke not just from theory but from experience. A close friend to John Harvey Kellogg and Ellen White, he was personally and intimately involved in inner-city and health ministry. His article distinguishes between those focused on making church members, and those who love people unconditionally like Jesus; between those who aim to "forward the cause or some branch of the work," and those who are focused on "humanity." Jesus focused on "needs" and not on "results." It is only "genuine love for humanity," says Paulson, which will win people to Christ. The person who is interested in ministering only to people he or she thinks can become church members actually builds "distrust and suspicion" and "closes more and more doors" (Paulson 1901, 717).

### In Search of an Adventist Theology of Urban Mission

This motivation for ministry has led the church to engage in urban mission at various stages of its history. Toward the end of the 19th Century, for example, Adventists focused strongly on cities. Because of Adventist visionaries such as Ellen White, John Harvey Kellogg, and David Paulson, medical work played a major role in these urban initiatives.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists published annual reports on city missions from 1885 through 1899. The 1886 Report indicated there were 36 Adventist city missions, employing a total of 102

denominational workers and 224 lay people serving as interns and trainees (Warden n.d.). And this was at a time when world membership was only 23,111 (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1887:48). If these numbers had kept growing proportionally to church membership, today there would be more than 79,000 denominational workers employed directly in urban mission.

Adventist urban mission appears to have peaked in the 1890s. By the turn of the century, a “medical missionary” project in Chicago, led by Kellogg and Paulson, included “a small hospital, free clinics, a soup kitchen, visiting nurses program, emergency residences for men and women, and the Life Boat Mission where evangelistic and social work was done” (Warden n.d.). Searching for the best location for their mission, Kellogg asked the police chief to identify “the dirtiest and wickedest spot in all Chicago” (Sheppard 2007:67).

Ellen White gave full support to this initiative, but became increasingly unhappy with its direction. She was concerned that it was over-centralized, investing too much into one city. It was also focusing only on the poor, a work that should be done, but not at the neglect of ministry to other classes. In addition, Kellogg was raising medical ministry above spiritual ministry, and making the Chicago Mission non-denominational (Butler 1970). By 1910 Adventist urban mission was languishing, and it has never really gone off life-support.

What motivates Adventist urban mission today? Is the example of Jesus’ love and compassion for people leading us to the cities, and guiding our approach to ministry? For a global church with a baptized adult membership of more than 18 million—a large number of whom live in cities—the Adventist Church has done surprisingly little work in developing a theology of the city, or of mission to the city. Various Adventist theologians have addressed the topic, but a comprehensive theology of Adventist urban mission remains to be developed.

In 1980 Adventist missiologist Gotfried Oosterwal claimed in *Ministry*, the church’s official magazine for clergy, that “with very few exceptions, no serious, creative attempts” had been made by Adventists to reach the cities (Oosterwal 1980:19). Later, Clifford Jones wrote an article in the same journal titled, “Toward a Theological Basis for Urban Ministry” (2004:10-13). It addresses Adventist neglect of urban mission, outlines the beginnings of a biblical theology of urban mission, but does not address a specifically Adventist theological perspective.

Much of Adventist popular literature regarding mission to the cities discusses Ellen White’s writings on the topic and she continues to be the leading Adventist voice on the topic. In fact, the most influential Adventist work on city ministry is her book published posthumously and titled,

somewhat ironically, *Country Living* (White 1946). This compilation includes statements from books, manuscripts, and personal letters. Naturally reflecting the compilers' choices, it focuses mostly on the positive benefits of rural living. So although White actually wrote more about ministering in cities as she did about leaving them, it is not evident in this compilation.

The dominant Adventist discourse about urban mission has followed the emphasis of this book, privileging the country against the city. And the church has paid a high price for ignoring the deeper, nuanced, and balanced approach Ellen White had to urban mission. The evidence of actual Adventist work in cities, which Ellen White encouraged and supported, suggests that her views were more complex than the dominant discourse suggests. For example, when in 1901 Stephen and Hetty Haskell went as missionaries to America's largest city, New York, they lived in an apartment in the heart of the city—a couple of blocks from Central Park. Ellen White wrote that God “was in your going” (Robinson 1967:194).

That same year witnessed the first-ever crash on the New York Stock Exchange. Thousands of small investors limped away bankrupt. And in the summer, New York City withered under the deadliest heat wave in its history. In a one-week period at least 989 people died in weather that Cole Thompson describes as “so hot it melted asphalt and drove scores of New Yorkers insane” (Thompson n.d.). If you were planning to flee the city to find rural bliss, 1901 was as good a time as any.

Haskell seemed almost scared that the wider church would forget them, and the urban jungle would render them anonymous. “Do not let our brethren forget to pray for us,” he wrote. “Do not forget the address. It is 400 West 57th St., New York City” (Haskell 1901a:448). For Haskell, this was not some sort of short mission trip, where they could finish their ministry quickly and then flee to the safety of the countryside. He even wanted to buy a hall where “the public of this city can be reached.” He hoped “that those who have means to invest in establishing a settled place for the Lord to abide in this great city will send it in” (Haskell 1901b:739). A year later Ellen White wrote “We are far behind in following the light given us to enter the large cities and erect memorials for God.”

## A Renewed Focus

There are signs that the bias against cities has started to be addressed, due largely to a renewed focus on the church's missiological understandings. Adventists have, at least since 1873, taken seriously a worldwide mission, leading the church to work in more than 206 countries and territories. Now a new wave of Adventist mission is emphasizing “into all

the world” as also including largely neglected urban areas. This urban emphasis is reflected in key statements from church leaders, a growing number of meetings and seminars, increasing numbers of articles in denominational publications, and larger church budget allocations.

In 2012 the Ellen White Estate released a new compilation of White’s writings on urban mission. Its content and title—*Ministry to the Cities*—reflects a different emphasis to the earlier volume on country living (White 2012). In the introduction, the editors write, “her instruction on city work is less well known than her appeals for locating in more rural settings.” A major reason being, of course, that for nearly 70 years the Ellen White “textbook” on the subject was *Country Living*.

### Rescue the Perishing

Viewing cities as places of evil and wrongdoing has led Christians to see them as places in need of some form of rescue. The definition of rescue has varied at different times and in different places, but has tended to divide down theological lines. At one extreme has been an approach focusing less on personal moral issues and more on social oppression, exploitation of the poor, and economic injustice. While engaging in various types of social care, it goes further by advocating on behalf of the poor and marginalized. Mostly postmillennialist in theology and representing more mainline and liberal wings of protestant Christianity, this approach centers urban ministry on building a representative kingdom of God on earth.

On the other extreme, more conservative and fundamentalist forms of Christianity have focused on individual salvation and the second coming of Jesus. Evangelicals, for example, have a history of social engagement (Steensland and Goff 2014:4-9), but focus less on social action and more on social care. Examples of this form of mission are urban “rescue missions” for alcoholics, prostitutes, and the homeless and hungry. But evangelicals are statistically less likely to be involved in social service programs than mainline Protestants (Steensland and Goff 2014:223), and their primary agenda is evangelistic (Elisha 2011:212).

Premillennialist Seventh-day Adventists in some ways fit more comfortably into the second group. As their name suggests, a central emphasis of the church is on the second coming of Jesus, and evangelism in various forms dominates its agenda. The tenacity to which Adventists hold to hope in the second coming is matched by a pessimism about establishing a utopia on earth. Central in their belief is that only at the *parousia* will final and true justice, freedom, and harmony be inaugurated.

And yet in other significant ways Adventists do not comfortably fit this group. While pointing to the importance and urgency of the second

coming, they also believe in “occupying till He comes” (Luke 19:13). And the longer the waiting, the stronger the emphasis on occupying. Although stereotypically “other-worldly,” Adventists have not been backward when it comes to earthly considerations. As historian of American religion Edwin Scott Gaustad observes, “While expecting a kingdom of God from the heavens, [Adventists] work diligently for one on earth” (Theobald 1985:120).

The Adventist Church operates the largest unified Protestant school system in the world, and an international network of clinics and hospitals. Slave states banned Adventist anti-slavery publications during the American Civil War (Reid 2001), the church today engages in international humanitarian work through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and it funds and operates AIDS clinics and education programs throughout Africa.

The church pioneered smoking cessation programs in the 1960s. It also funds and operates the International Religious Liberty Association and, at the founding of the Australian Commonwealth, teamed with atheists to successfully defeat the insertion of religion into the Australian Constitution. This latter activity led historian Richard Ely to comment wryly, “For a church that so rigorously and with such determination believed in the separation of Church and State, the Adventists played politics very well” (1976:44-45).

This tension between waiting for God’s coming kingdom while working for his kingdom on earth gives the Adventist Church a purpose and natural foundation for mission, including a specifically urban mission. This mission is further informed by a distinctive Adventist wholistic theology.

The official mission statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church lists its four major tasks as preaching, teaching, healing, and discipling. Under “healing” it states, “Affirming the biblical principles of the well-being of the whole person, we make the preservation of health and the healing of the sick a priority and through our ministry to the poor and oppressed, cooperate with the Creator in His compassionate work of restoration” (Executive Committee 2009). The church’s seventh fundamental belief states: “Though created free beings, each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2013:4; see also Kido 2010 and Kuhalampi 2010).

Ginger Hanks-Harwood writes that this wholism is “the very cornerstone” on which much of the church’s work has been built (1995:127). A survey of North American theologians in the 1980s showed that Adven-



tist theologians saw “wholism” as the church’s major contribution to the world (Bull and Lockhart 2008:33). Adventist history, practice, and doctrines come together in a unique package marrying the spiritual with the physical, theology with health, beliefs with lifestyle—and this can be its strength for urban ministry.

Underscoring this wholistic approach are the twin pillars of the church’s philosophy of health and education, with the philosophy of both being heavily indebted to Ellen White. Her philosophy of education has been extensively researched—see, for example Olsen 1988; Trujillo 2013; Chamberlain 2008; Snorrason 2005; Hilde 1970; Fowler 1977. She says that true education “has to do with the whole being . . . It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers” (White 2011:13). This wholistic approach to education is today demonstrated, to varying degrees, in more than 7,500 schools, colleges, and universities around the world.

White was also the “architect and chief promoter” (Kuhlampi 2010:30) of what is today known as the “Adventist lifestyle,” and her philosophy of health has been the subject of much discussion. On one side are apologetic Adventist accounts that seek to show Ellen White’s counsel as inspired by God and proven by science (see, e.g., Reid 1982; Schaefer 1997; and Robinson 1955). On the other side are critical accounts, looking to sociology and psychology, rather than divine inspiration, as the key factors in her work (Bull and Lockhart 2007; Numbers 2007; Lampkin 2000).

John Harvey Kellogg and his Battle Creek Sanitarium gave early expression to her vision, which today is reflected in the largest Protestant health system in the world. This system is an international network of more than 600 hospitals, sanitariums, clinics and dispensaries. In fact, the church employs more than 93,000 people in health-related professions, which is more than the total number of Adventist pastors and teachers combined. The church’s health emphasis also includes long-standing public health advocacy through a wide variety of programs and initiatives promoting a plant-based diet and alcohol and drug-free living.

However, there are question marks about the grand narrative of Adventist achievements through schools and health institutions. Some critics say the church’s school and health care systems have departed from White’s “blueprint.” They see the school curriculum as insufficiently wholistic, focusing on achieving academic grades to the neglect of the involvement in physical labor; on games rather than proper physical development; on secular studies to the neglect of religious instruction. Likewise, hospitals are seen as focusing more on acute care and drugs rather than wholistic prevention and more natural approaches to cure and rehabilitation. And

so smaller alternative networks of independent Adventist schools and health and lifestyle centers have been established.

It is also worth considering, but not here, the extent to which Adventist hospitals and schools might symbolize a growing institutionalized social engagement at the expense of action at the grassroots level of the local church. A wholesale “out-sourcing” of Adventist wholistic urban mission from the local church level to official church institutions and agencies may appear an attractive option in some ways, but it would come at a cost.

### **Key Doctrines**

The Adventist wholistic approach to urban mission is further bolstered by three key doctrines, namely, the church’s understanding of human nature, its experience of the Sabbath, and its conviction that it is called to share the gospel in the lead-up to the Second Coming.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has no monopoly on wholistic theology or spiritual practice. However, it offers a systematic approach that elevates healthful living to a central status in its message and mission. The church’s history, practice and doctrines come together in a unique package marrying the spiritual with the physical, theology with health, beliefs with lifestyle. Thus, among the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Adventist Church that address such things as the trinity, salvation, and baptism, Belief 22, “Christian Behavior” includes this statement:

Because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we are to care for them intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, we are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures. Since alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and the irresponsible use of drugs and narcotics are harmful to our bodies, we are to abstain from them as well. Instead, we are to engage in whatever brings our thoughts and bodies into the discipline of Christ, who desires our wholeness, joy, and goodness. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2013:9)

Adventists often refer to medical and health work as the “right arm of the message,” an expression derived from Ellen White’s writings (2002:134). As Adventist historian Arthur Patrick writes, “Suffice it to say that ‘the right arm of the message’ is so important to the body of Adventism that without it we would lack the wholeness and strength to aggressively press forward with our mission to bring good news to every ‘nation, tribe, language and people’ (Revelation 14:6, NIV)” (Patrick 2004).

Seventh-day Adventists reject the platonic separation of human body and soul and hold to the Jewish understanding of the inseparability of hu-



man and spiritual life from bodily experience. As Richard Rice says, “humans *are* bodies—they don’t *have* bodies, and they *are* souls—they don’t *have* souls” (Rice 2006:5, 6). They believe that the body and life are gifts to be celebrated, and they cannot be content with caring only about some special spiritual dimension in people’s lives. They see mission as involving the whole person—spiritual, mental, physical, social.

The Adventist concept of the seventh-day Sabbath is also foundational to its wholistic approach to ministry (Tonstad 2009). However, Seventh-day Adventists have often neutered the Sabbath doctrine, reducing it exclusively to a debate over whether to worship on Sunday or Saturday. While not losing sight of the importance of the seventh day, in more recent years Adventist theologians have sought to also recapture its heart. Katsumi Higashide says that Sabbath “is a reminder of the wholeness of human beings” and that it is a “symbol of creation, redemption, and the final restoration of wholeness resulting from hope” (2009:178).

Adventists see the seventh-day Sabbath as a 24-hour immersion in physical, emotional, and spiritual rest and renewal. It is a weekly time to subvert the dominance—particularly evident in urban areas—of busyness, acquisition, entertainment, business and markets. It is a reminder that people are more important than things. In addition, Sabbath is rich with implications for ecological concerns and social justice—concepts of increasing importance in urban areas. Sigve Tonstad says the seventh day was the “launching pad for the most exceptional and ambitious project of social justice in the ancient world (2009:126).

Adventists have also adopted the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:8-12 as their *raison d’être*, which they see as vital in the lead-up to the second coming of Jesus. These messages center on the loving and just character of God, the vital importance of rejecting false gods of every variety—worshiping only God as Creator—and the need to depend on Jesus for the gift of salvation. It is a timely message to urban areas crammed with a plethora of gods—both secular and religious.

### Urban Centers of Influence

Historically the Adventist Church has tended to focus its mission in rural areas and on islands, but now operates in a world that is increasingly unfamiliar to it—a world that is dominantly urban. Classic Adventist methods of outreach in the past such as public lectures on Bible doctrine still attract some in today’s large cities, but miss the majority of people who seem more culturally distant and less responsive. Ellen White, more than a hundred years ago, pointed out that in cities there are people who will never be reached by public meetings (White 2005:364).

In the face of its increasing cultural isolation in places where the majority of the world's population lives, can the church rediscover the wholistic approach to mission exemplified in Jesus' ministry? What would an Adventist theology of mission to the cities look like not just in words, but in on-the-ground activity?

Ellen White championed an approach to urban mission that she called "centers of influence" (1948:115). She envisioned small urban wholistic ministry centers linking the church to the community through service. She talked about things such as health centers, treatment rooms, and vegetarian restaurants. Today they could take different forms, but still have the same goal—ministering to people in all dimensions of their lives (White 2005:364). In these centers Adventist hope-filled doctrines can fuel a ministry of service, ministering to people through health, education, and other forms of care.

White saw these small urban centers as providing a platform, a springboard, from which Christ's method of ministry could be implemented. Christ's method provides the blueprint for centers of influence—a wholistic ministry involving words and action. These centers involve more than just persuading people to accept certain doctrinal beliefs. They provide an opportunity for more wholistic care for people and less preaching, and a closer incarnational approach rather than ministry from a distance. They allow Adventists to bring hope and well-being—*shalom*—to urban-dwellers and communities.

The concept of centers of influence provides an opportunity to bring together Adventist historical and theological strengths into a practical ministry model. Today there are a growing number of examples and variations of this approach, and not only from within the Adventist Church. In the opening pages of *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, a book published this year, Brian Steensland and Philip Goff give an example of this new engagement—opening a coffee shop in an urban neighborhood in order to connect students from a nearby college with poor neighborhood residents (2014). Take away the coffee and keep the structure and concept, and basically what they are describing is a 21st Century version of Ellen White's center of influence concept outlined more than 100 years ago.

Today Adventist urban centers of influence take various forms in dozens of countries: second-hand stores, vegetarian restaurants, health clinics, music centers, recreational facilities, health food stores, massage centers, and the list goes on. Many centers find ways to partner with *shalom* work being done by other community groups, and invite other community groups to partner with their activities. What they all have in common is a plan to minister to people's physical and spiritual needs, plant new groups of believers, and lead people to Jesus.

As we move forward into the 21st Century, we must allow the shalom-making ministry of Jesus to guide Adventist discourse about cities and mission to cities. It does not mean reaching for some new philosophical or theological framework, but drawing from resources in Adventism's own rich tradition of teachings and practice of wholistic ministry. It means finding new and creative ways to share the Adventist hope to urban-dwellers, grounded in the example of Jesus Himself.

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